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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated implementation of a federally funded outreach project, Bridges (Best Practice-Based Services for Including Students with Serious Emotional Disturbance in General Education), at one elementary school in Vermont. The project is designed to build the capacity of rural public schools to fully include students with severe disabilities and severe emotional disturbance (SED) within general education and community settings, and to provide support for their families. At the model site, 12 students in grades K through 8 have had individual student support teams formed to assist in problem-solving and developing appropriate community-school collaborative educational services. Evaluation involved semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of the school year with the students with SED and their peers, parents, and regular and special education teachers, as well as analysis of completed surveys, questionnaires, and a behavior checklist. Results suggest that the project has had some initial impact upon all 12 students, their parents, educational and related service providers, community based service providers and businesses, and other community members. Educators and administrators strongly supported providing educational services for all children in the regular classroom environment, while parents felt strongly that education programs should address more than just academics. (DB)

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Supporting Students with Serious Emotional Disturbance in Rural Schools and Communities

Introduction

Bridges (Best Practice-Based Services For Including Students with Serious Emotional Disturbance in General Education, Their Local Schools and Communities) is a three year grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The dual purpose of this Outreach Project is to build the capacity of rural public schools to fully include students with severe disabilities and severe emotional disturbance within general education and community settings, and to provide support for their families. The project and institutes were based on several interacting elements: (a) best practices for educating students, including those with serious emotional disturbance, within their local schools; (b) the Responsive Classroom (Northeast Foundation for Children, 1994) curriculum for strengthening teaching practices, and developing innovative classroom and school programs; (c) a School-Community and Model School planning team model, with school, family, student, other agency and community involvement for increasing the availability of best practices for children and adolescents in the school and community; and (d) an Individual Student Planning Team model for including students with serious emotional disturbance in general education settings and activities in their local school and community.

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Method

Subjects and Site

One rural Vermont K-8 school is participating as the model school site, and approximately 20 teams from other rural states across Vermont and the nation will participate in two national institutes. Montgomery Elementary School was chosen as the model site based on the following criteria: administrative commitment at the district and building level for providing educational services for all children within the general education setting; willingness to engage in community and school-wide planning (Fox & Williams, 1991); willingness to develop individual student support teams (Hamilton, Welkowitz, Mandeville, Prue & Fox, 1995); openness to involve parents in all aspects of their student's program; and commitment to collaborate with other agencies.

Within the model school site, 12 students, in grades K through 8, have had individual student support teams formed to assist in problem-solving and developing appropriate educational services.

Intervention

A collaborative approach between the community and school, as well as an individualized approach for students, was emphasized. A School-Community Team and Model School Team were developed. The teams consisted of representation from the school faculty, administration, community businesses, parents and students. The School-Community Team was formed in an effort to strengthen the communication between community members, parents and the school, stressing the value of input from everyone involved in the education of children. The Model School Team was formed to assist the school in coordination of federal, state and local initiatives, provide problem-solving supports for the school overall, and identify the most effective educational practices to support all students in the areas of school and classroom structure, climate, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Finally, the Individual Student Support Teams were set up to address the specific needs of students who are experiencing unique challenges. The outcome of this intensive level of teaming has been the inclusion and provision of appropriate educational plans for every child, regardless of their type of disability.

As a model school, Montgomery Elementary School will be sharing its experiences and approaches with other teams from other small rural schools in the United States. Teams of teachers, parents and community members will provide mini workshops and conference presentations, and facilitate team planning with the visiting schools.

Evaluation

The project used quantitative and qualitative methodology to evaluate preliminary outcomes. Semi-structured interviews are conducted at the beginning and end of each school year with the students with SED, their peers, their parents, and their regular and special education teachers.

Surveys and their corroborating questionnaires were completed by the student's family, his or her peers' families in the model school site, the school administrator, regular and special education teachers, and a representative sample of students in K through 8 during the first year of the grant, and will be re-administered in Year 3. Questionnaires assessing team functioning were completed by members of the students' individual support team, the School-Community Team and Model School Team, and were administered at the beginning and end of each school year. T-test analyses were conducted for each question of the Team Assessment to determine whether the participant's response prior to participation in the project was significantly different from their response following participation, support, and training. This same analyses will be done with remaining questionnaires; however, means are currently determined for each question of the premeasures.

A behavior checklist was also completed at the beginning of the school year and at the end of the school year by the student with SED (YSR; Achenbach, 1991b) if over 10 years of age, his or her teachers (TRF; Achenbach, 1991a), and his or her parents (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). *T*-test analyses were conducted to determine whether the *T* scores are significantly different for each of these measures following training, support and participation in the project.

Results

Results suggested that the project has had some initial impact upon all students in the model school, their parents, educational and related service providers, community based service providers and businesses, and other community members.

Surveys and Checklists

Means were determined for each question of the General Education Teacher, Special Education Teacher and Administration Survey, and the Parent Survey (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively). Overall, the responses of the educators and administration indicated strong support for providing educational services for all children in the regular classroom environment; while parents did not strongly agree or disagree. The parents, however, did feel strongly that education programs should address more than just academics, and the local school should provide for all of their children.

There were several statistically significant differences for the team members' responses between the first and second administration (see Table 3 and 4, respectively) of the School-Community Team Assessment and the Model School Team Assessment. Factors related to collaboration which achieved statistical significance have an asterisk.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The students primarily focused on how they handled stressful situations within the classroom and school, or how they help other students. The students who experienced behavioral difficulties reported fewer coping strategies and described responses to difficult situations that were often ineffective. The educators focused on the quality of education for the students; awareness and concern for individual student differences; needs and styles of teaching required; and the need for flexibility in order to manage stress and the changing workload. The parents of children with SED identified three themes: (a) appreciation for meaningful involvement in their children's education; (b) in addition to academic priorities, the importance of social and emotional educational opportunities; and (c) concern for their children's development and their changing role as parents with each passing year.

Discussion

These preliminary findings- despite the small sample size–continue to support prior research in regard to the inclusion of children with severe emotional disturbance within the regular classroom, school and community environments (Hamilton, Broer, & Welkowitz, 1995; Hamilton, Welkowitz, Topper, & Inatsuka, 1993). With adequate school, community-wide planning and access to training, and use of an individual student support planning team process, educators, administrators, students and families are accepting of children with SED in the general education classroom in their local public school. It is expected that the two national institutes will be an effective training vehicle for exposing these components and strategies to other rural schools and communities.

Table 1
General Education Teacher, Administration, and Special Education Teacher Survey

Don't Know	Strongly Disagree					Agree				Strongly Agree	
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
										Mean	*N*
1.	"I would refuse having _____ in my class if I had a choice."									1.37	8
2.	"I have not been involved in developing the educational program for _____ "									2.13	8
3.	" _____ 's presence does not interfere with my ability to address the educational needs of my other students".									4.8	8
4.	"I always have the nagging feeling I'm not doing enough to include _____ ."									3.75	8
5.	"Initially I didn't know much about how to deal with _____ and how to respond to him/her and interact with him/her. I was afraid."									4.25	8
6.	"Having _____ in my general education class is having a positive social/ emotional impact on the nondisabled students."									5.38	8
7.	I believe any teacher (given support), can teach any child in his/her general education classroom".									6.25	8
8.	"I don't think I really have developed a relationship with _____ compared to my relationships with other students. I still haven't really connected with her/him."									2.25	8
9.	"Getting to know kids with emotional difficulties is not very different than getting along with a whole lot of other people in life."									7.63	8
10.	"I feel very comfortable with _____."									7.13	8
11.	"I don't think anybody really knows what to do with _____. Specialists come in, but nobody really gives me any suggestions of what to do."									4.71	7
12.	I feel like I am not getting any support".									3.5	8
13.	The paraprofessionals assigned to my class have received adequate training.									4.57	7
14.	"Given appropriate supports, I would welcome a student with serious emotional difficulties in my class in the future."									8.86	7

Table 2
Parent Survey

Don't Know	Strongly Disagree					Agree				Strongly Agree		
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
											Mean	*N*
1.	My child feels comfortable interacting with children who have emotional difficulties.										6	19
2.	My child feels more comfortable interacting with people who have emotional difficulties than I did when I was a youngster.										5	18
3.	The opportunity to interact with a classmate who has emotional difficulty has had a positive impact on my child's social/emotional growth.										6	17
4.	My child feels positively about having a classmate who has emotional difficulties										6	16
5.	Having a classmate with emotional difficulties has interfered with my child receiving a good education										6	18
6.	Overall, I feel that having a classmate with emotional difficulties has been a positive experience for my child.										5	17
7.	Having a classmate with emotional difficulties has enhanced my child's education.										3	16
8.	Having a classmate with emotional difficulties has increased my child's perception of differences in others.										8	17
9.	I am accepting of different kinds of people.										9	24
10.	I feel that our local school provides educational programs for all of our children.										8	23
11.	I feel that educational programs should address:											
	A. only academic skills										5	24
	B. social interactions and interpersonal skills										9	24
	C. self-control and self-management skills										9	23
	D. vocational skills										8	24
	E. self-care skills										8	22

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Table 3
School Community Team Assessment
(Paired Samples *t*-Test, *N*= 7)

1 2 Definitely Not True	3 4 Probably Not True	5 6 Sometimes True	7 8 Probably True	9 10 Definitely True
Safety		T = -2.076	p = .093	
Decision-Making		T = -2.887	p = .028*	
Trust		T = -1.865	p = .121	
Ability to Resolve Conflict		T = -2.414	p = .052	
Productivity		T = -4.347	p = .005*	
Community		T = -1.814	p = .129	
Cohesiveness		T = -4.000	p = .010*	
Equality of Members		T = 1.429	p = .203	
Commitment of Team		T = -1.890	p = .108	
Ownership		T = -2.048	p = .086	
Common Goals		T = 1.726	p = .135	
Sharing		T = -2.198	p = .070	
Brainstorming		T = -1.901	p = .106	
Action		T = -2.500	p = .047*	
Processing		T = -2.772	p = .032*	

Table 4
Model School Team Assessment
(Paired Samples *t*-Test, *N*= 9)

1 2 Definitely Not True	3 4 Probably Not True	5 6 Sometimes True	7 8 Probably True	9 10 Definitely True
Safety		T = -4.733	p = .002*	
Decision-Making		T = -6.928	p = .000*	
Trust		T = -5.715	p = .000*	
Ability to Resolve Conflict		T = -2.490	p = .038*	
Productivity		T = -3.087	p = .015*	
Sense of Community		T = -2.066	p = .073	
Cohesiveness		T = -7.426	p = .000*	
Equality of Members		T = -2.530	p = .035*	
Commitment of Team		T = -2.081	p = .071	
Ownership		T = -4.041	p = .004*	
Common Goals		T = -2.987	p = .017*	
Sharing of Roles		T = -7.778	p = .000*	
Brainstorming		T = -3.900	p = .005*	
Action		T = -4.406	p = .002*	
Processing		T = -5.160	p = .001*	

*Significant at .05

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